

**9th Annual International Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Conference:
Extended Abstract Template – Biker Revs on Tour:
Pilgrimage motivations of motorbiking vicars from Leeds Diocese.**

Name of Author

Rev. Ruth Dowson

UK Centre for Events Management, Leeds Beckett University, UK

R.Dowson@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

Biography

Rev. Ruth Dowson, Senior Lecturer at the UK Centre for Events Management, was previously an events professional. Ordained in the Church of England in 2012, her research combines her passion for church and events. Ruth's research interests include the eventisation of faith, and the venuefication of sacred spaces and buildings.

Abstract

The new Church of England Diocese of Leeds was instituted in April 2014. To mark this development, a group of motorcycling vicars began to meet regularly and undertake 'rides out', across the diocese and further afield. Through a series of semi-structured interviews and more informal conversations with the Biker Revs, including staying with them at religious destinations on two longer trips in 2016 and 2017, this research investigates their experiences and motivations for undertaking pilgrimage on motorbikes. As a basis for comparison, this paper utilizes Michalowski and Dubisch's 2001 iconic ethnographic research on an American motorcycle pilgrimage, to analyse the group's activities. Ordained bikers identify the group as a safe space for clergy, outside the parish, where 'I can be me', whilst spouses of clergy recognised the benefits of spending time with 'others like me who understand the pressures of clergy life'.

Introduction

In April 2014, an historic and unique moment for the Church of England witnessed the merger of three existing Yorkshire dioceses into one, creating a new mega-diocese. One response, with the aim of bringing together lay and ordained people from across the new diocese, was the formation of a group of motorbike enthusiasts, now known as the ‘Biker Revs’. Mainly comprising vicars and their spouses, the Biker Revs have become a regular sight in the region and beyond. On their first ride out, they visited the cathedrals from the former three dioceses, in Ripon, Bradford and Wakefield, causing ripples of publicity on the evening news. In between local day ‘rides out’, the group has undertaken three longer motorbike pilgrimages. For their first pilgrimage, in April 2015, the Biker Revs visited the island of Iona, off the coast of Western Scotland, widely regarded as the cradle of Christianity for the British Isles. In June 2016, for their second journey, the group travelled to Ballycastle in Northern Ireland, home of the peace and reconciliation Corrymeela Community, and in June 2017, continuing the theme of visiting places where the national saints of the United Kingdom are remembered, the Biker Revs travelled to St David’s, in Wales.

Situated within the theme of the conference ‘Motivations for Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage’, this research investigates the motivations for pilgrimage of the Yorkshire Biker Revs. It takes as its theoretical focus, the iconic ethnographic research undertaken by Michalowski and Dubisch (2012) on the motorbike pilgrimage route that reconnects American ex-servicemen with their Vietnam War historical roots, crossing the country from California to Washington DC.

Literature Review

Pilgrimage

Theoretical explorations of the pilgrimage experience and the pilgrim journey today inform a critical view of the pilgrim-tourist dichotomy (Cassar & Munro, 2016): to what extent is a pilgrim also a tourist, and to what extent does the tourist become a pilgrim (Raj & Griffin, 2015; Olsen 2013; Fladmark, 1998) has been long-discussed. Sturm addresses this type of relationship in a different context (cricket), and concludes that there is a ‘fluidity’ (2015, p237) which may also be applicable to the pilgrimages of motorbiking vicars. The characteristics and purposes of the pilgrimage journey are of most interest here (Cassar & Munro 2016), along with the eventual

pilgrimage destination (Scriven, 2014), and the emergence of the feeling of belonging, or Turnerian ‘communitas’ (Turner & Turner 1978), in such group activities.

Motorcycle Research

Relevant motorcycle research considers the identity of the motorcyclist (Alford & Ferriss, 2006); and Christian motorbikers (Remsberg, 2000). The concept of motorcycle pilgrims is not new, and has been documented by American researchers, Michalowski and Dubisch (2001), through their participation in an annual pilgrimage by motorcyclists, ‘Run for the Wall’ which has taken place since 1989. This journey begins in the western United States and draws in more riders along the way to the memorial wall that commemorates those American soldiers who lost their lives in the Vietnam War. A compellingly-told narrative, the account explores the motivations and emotional experiences of those seeking healing, making meaning and reconstructing community memory along the route and at the destination, which for many has become a sacred place. According to Michalowski and Dubisch, the reasons for undertaking pilgrimage include the acquisition of ‘spiritual benefits’, seeking ‘healing for physical or psychological problems’, an opportunity ‘to honour the holy places of their religious traditions’, ‘to establish or affirm their own religious, cultural or personal identity’, and ‘to express political or social protest’ (2001, p15). Each day, the journey begins with religious rituals, including shared prayers, led by the accompanying chaplains. Every stop, during the day or at night, finds local hosts providing free hospitality – accommodation, food and refreshments. New ‘deep and sustaining bonds of friendship’ (Michalowski & Dubisch, 2001, p19) are made, and existing attachments renewed. The symbolic role of the motorcycle journey is expressed as joining the pilgrim bikers ‘in a common brotherhood of the road, while simultaneously setting them apart’ from other travellers, on other journeys, using ‘more ordinary (and more comfortable) means’ (Michalowski & Dubisch, 2001, p15).

Methodology

Michalowski and Dubisch describe their motorcycle pilgrimage research as ethnography of a cyclic ritual, and their participation as being ‘motivated by strong feelings that we **had** to go’ (2001, p20). This paper’s primary research also involves an ethnographic study, with the researcher as participant-observer, reflecting on subjective, personal experiences (Beres, 2012; Scharen, 2012), and sharing in common with the group, the characteristics of being ordained, located within the

Diocese of Leeds, and married to a biker. The primary research includes interviews with the Biker Revs, exploring their motivations, views and experiences in building a sense of kinship and passion for a shared pursuit that perhaps differentiates bikers from many other leisure activities. In addition, there will be personal reflections on accompanying the Biker Revs (as a non-biker, Rev) on two of their pilgrimage rides.

Within the research analysis, there emerge questions of whether there are differences between the views of clergy and non-clergy; stipendiary (full-time paid clergy) and non-stipendiary (unpaid volunteer clergy) ordained participants; the roles of vicars, curates, ordinands, clergy spouses, and lay people; and bikers for whom their bike is their primary mode of transport as opposed to those for whom biking is a hobby – even if the hobbyists have three motorbikes in their garage!

Results

The research results of interviews with the Biker Revs have been compared with the American biker pilgrimage research outcomes of Michalowski and Dubisch (2001), especially with regard to the identified purpose of the rides, and of the group identity. The initial trigger for the Biker Revs group was the creation of a new diocese, bringing together three former dioceses and additional geographic area changes, a unique event in the history of the Church of England. The purpose of setting up this group was to do something that helped both ordained and lay people from across the new diocese to come together and get to know each other.

Both the American Run for the Wall motorcycle pilgrims and the Biker Revs shared the ritual of fellowship and prayer before setting off each day, and the Biker Revs held daily services (Morning Prayer), and shared Holy Communion in their travels in the footsteps of the priests who brought Christianity to the British Isles. They recognised in their motorcycle rides, that kinship was a motivating factor; more than a ‘common interest’, it was a ‘shared passion’.

One interviewee used his motorbike as the focus for his presentation at a three-day interview for discerning whether he should go forward for ordination training. ‘Like any other biker, I am passionate about my bike and the possibility of riding the open road on a warm summer’s day’. He recognised that historically, bikers were seen as ‘lawless and aggressive...biker gangs [are] still known as ‘Hell’s Angels or the ‘Devil’s Disciples’, but he recognised that he was able to develop

close (male) friendships through biking together, and was able ‘to combine our love of bikes with our love of Christ’. ‘Friendship’ and ‘fellowship’ are the terms that many Christian bikers use to describe the impact of belonging to a Christian bikers’ group. But it was significant that the paid clergy members of the Biker Revs group found this as a safe space, where they could ‘be themselves’, outside of the confines of their parishes.

Discussion and Conclusion

The research indicates that the interviewee’s role in the church impacts on their responses; these roles include vicars, curates, ordinands, clergy spouses and lay people. Future research might examine the impact of gender, as the Biker Revs group includes one female biker vicar, whereas all the other women ride pillion. Ordained bikers identify the group as a safe space for clergy, outside the parish, where ‘I can be me’, whilst spouses of clergy recognised the benefits of spending time with ‘others like me who understand the pressures of clergy life’. Overall, the motivations for members of the Biker Revs group match those of traditional pilgrims and other biker pilgrims, such as those who participate in the ‘Run for the Wall’, whilst stipendiary clergy in particular value the benefits of this close community, where they find the freedom to act as they wish, amongst their peers. And finally, the trigger and purpose of the Biker Revs group has achieved its objective – to bring clergy and laity together from across the new diocese, building new relationships and support mechanisms, especially for clergy.

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